

Robin Friend

Bastard Countryside

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As noted in Robert Macfarlane's accompanying text to this book the peripheries of towns and cities, or the interstitial spaces between the rural and urban, continue to be fertile subjects for photographers as well creative practitioners working in other disciplines. These spaces have been defined in various ways but Robin Friend has adopted Victor Hugo's provocative phrase 'bastard countryside'¹ to position this series, that he has developed over the course of the last 15 years. For a viewer sympathetic of Friend's fascination with these kinds of themes, or critical of the casual way that these spaces are routinely abused, the photographs are compelling; rich in their visual clarity, and attest to what is possible to create through an obsessive commitment to a concern.

Rubbish and waste dominate the project, from the pruned boughs of a conifer on a giant bonfire through to the rusting hull of the RMS Mulheim wrecked near Lands End. In other projects Friend has mastered working in subterranean environments and the underground appears here frequently; most dramatically in the penultimate image of a pile of scrap cars dumped somehow in a cave or disused mine. This is an enviable, photogenic find and it is a little frustrating that Friend denies us any captions or index of any sort so that the reader might examine further the narratives behind these places that are deeply intriguing. This decision, we might assume (coupled with the exaggeration of certain colours in some pictures), could be an attempt to shift the series from the documentary, or from the topographic, to a much more subjective stance, forcing the viewer perhaps towards a more profound questioning of our emotional relationship with non-urban spaces.

In addition to ponds, pools and streams of one sort or another, coastal views and structures are a conspicuous feature of book. This is worth considering as, despite literally being *on the edge of land*, coastal sites tend not to be associated with the geographical concept of the 'edgelands'.² Indeed, the expanse of the ocean seems contrary to the claustrophobia of the spaces sandwiched between town and country. It is also worth noting that *Bastard Countryside*, and many of these images, came out of a much more lyrically contextualised body of work titled *Belly of the Whale*³ that embraced ideas around mythology and literature. The re-contextualization of these images should not necessarily be read negatively: time, critical distance, and continuous analysis inevitably reveals deeper insight into creative intentions and the true nature of one's motivations.

It is possible that the earlier title was made redundant with Friend's discovery and the ensuing graphic depiction of a stranded sperm whale; its blood leeching into the sea and encircling the rotting ribs of the wreck of the Sheraton steam trawler. Like the proverbial siren, this Norfolk beach has drawn these divergent beasts to the same fate. It is difficult to imagine a more poignant image of the collision of man and nature that Friend is so keen to articulate. This image is one of only two in the book containing people – excepting the multiple portraits of scarecrows, à la Peter Mitchell⁴ – that punctuate the landscapes. The absence of human figures coupled with the rusting detritus in all forms, as well as

archaeological relics like the concave monoliths that were early warning devices for enemy aircraft during the First World War, alludes to an abandoned, post-apocalyptic⁵ landscape.

The surreal is another common thread, a nice example of which is the photograph of somebody's half-finished boat project wedged under a road bridge at Chudleigh near Dartmoor, that would be impossible to navigate along the narrow brook that it is perched next to – assuming its owner might ever get around to finishing the job. Hugo's 'bastard countryside' refers primarily to the land encircling Paris, which has a certain relationship to surrealism, including Man Ray and his picture titled 'Terrain Vague' (c. 1932) which is believed to have been made in homage to Eugène Atget's photographs of the same area.⁶ If an alignment with surrealism is deliberate, then a more critical justification of the decision to manipulate the colours of some of these pictures, in this superficially surreal way, is warranted.

Whether or not the catchy title is quite right for this work, Friend very directly reveals the 'illegitimate' British countryside: it has not been sanctioned or protected by law like its nobler cousins, the 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' or the 'National Park'. Should we celebrate the weirdness of the bastard countryside, or should we feel profoundly ashamed by our misuse of it? These spaces are of equal importance in terms of their biodiversity as well as our duty of their stewardship. Whilst the edgeland may be something of a cliché of contemporary photography, it is here that some of the worst of our abuses of the land can be witnessed and *Bastard Countryside* invites us to give it the attention it demands.

¹ Hugo, Victor [1862] (1982) *Les Misérables* (London: Penguin Classics p.498)

² The phrase was coined by Marion Shoard in the essay 'Edgelands', in Jenkins, Jennifer (2002) *Remaking the Landscape* (London: Profile Books)

³ Published in *Source* (62: Spring 2010)

⁴ See review of Peter Mitchell's *Some Thing mean Everything to Somebody* (<https://www.photomonitor.co.uk/some-thing-means-everything-to-somebody/>)

⁵ At least one image from the series has been posted on Friend's Instagram account tagged with #extinctionrebellion (<https://www.instagram.com/p/Bwj2ryhgLs/> 23.04.2019)

⁶ The extent of the complexity of this area – the 'banlieue' – is explored in Ian Walker's essay 'Terrain Vague' in Seawright, Paul (200) *Paul Seawright* (Salamanca: Salamanca University) (<http://ianwalkerphoto.com/visual-culture/terrain-vague/>)